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Music

Not for the weak of heart

Bay area-based trio Mi Ami celebrates release of its new CD

Mi Ami
When: 9 tonight
Where: Amnesia Bar, 853 Valencia St., San Francisco
Tickets: $8, www.amnesiathebar.com

By David Malitz
Washington Post

Daniel Martin-McCormick doesn't take lyric-writing lightly.

("I'm interested in exploring the way the dissolving of close relationships can create an intense cocktail of feelings where you're trying to let go and you're mourning the loss of a person. And you're also furious and angry, and you whiplash back and forth," says the 26-year-old singer-guitarist for the Bay Area-based trio Mi Ami.

Other themes include "that people have ideas and prejudices that basically turn someone from a human being into a commodity" and "experiencing life as somebody who is disconnected from their own self." Heavy stuff.

Thing is, you can listen to "Steal Your Face," the band's firecracker of a new album, and the lyrics might not even register until the seventh or eighth time through. What will hit you right away, and hit you hard, is the exhilarating sonic stew that Martin-McCormick and bandmates Jacob Long and Damon Palermo have cooked up. The band is throwing a CD release show tonight at San Francisco's Amnesia Bar before hitting the road for a lengthy tour of Europe (volcano permitting).

Mi Ami exists at the intersection where punk, funk, dance and blissed-out jams meet and mingle. The ingredients — including tribal drums, rumbling bass and Space Invaders-keyboard effects — create a feeling of unhinged mayhem. But chaos never reigns. In fact, "Steal Your Face" is an amazingly tight collection. It alternately slashes and glides through a sea of unsettled sounds, but the band is always in control of the noise it makes.

Daniel Martin-McCormick, left, and Jacob Long, center, perform with Damon Palermo, right, as Mi Ami. The trio will be at the Amnesia Bar in San Francisco tonight.

BEN RAYNER

There's another reason Martin-McCormick's words might not resonate right away: They aren't exactly delivered in the most audible manner. He's much more of a shrieker than a singer, favoring a spastic, high-pitched yelp that adds greatly to the urgency, if not necessarily the coherence, of the songs.

His is such a sharp, piercing wail that there are moments on the album, particularly on "Secrets," when it's hard to tell whether the sound is Martin-McCormick's voice or a high-pitched guitar note. Maybe it's both.

"I first started exploring singing when I was, like, 16," he explains, citing British post-punk band Huggy Bear as a major influence. "I was trying to do something high-pitched and aggressive because I didn't really know how to sing. Now it just comes pretty naturally."

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Still, Martin-McCormick is trying to expand his repertoire by adding a twist on "Steal Your Face," even if he doesn't know exactly how to describe it. "I've been getting into this ... not moan ... but maybe a whimper? An aggressive whimper?"

Not long after Martin-McCormick began exploring the upper registers of his voice, he found himself in one of Washington, D.C.'s best bands, Black Eyes. The five-piece group had released an album on local punk label Dischord and established itself as one of the most explosive live acts in the city. The group's shouty, percussion-heavy shows were cathartic adrenaline rushes that consistently left both audience and band members drenched in sweat.

But Black Eyes was a comet on the D.C. scene, shining brightly for just a couple of years before disbanding two months before the release of its second and final album. Eventually Martin-McCormick and bandmate Long moved to the other side of the country, and Mi Ami was born.

"At a certain point it was time to go explore a new environment. It was definitely an exciting shift and good for some artistic renewal," Martin-McCormick says.

Even if the intensity has come down just a notch from those teenage years, Mi Ami is still not for the weak of heart. Or ears. It may trade in some spiky moments for spacey ones, but the trio is constantly on the attack, armed with jagged edges and propulsive rhythms that separate it from many of its peers.

"It's interesting to be making this music now, since most people seem like they'd rather just have basically mellow pop music," Martin-McCormick says. "I don't really have a stance. That's cool. You gotta mellow out."

UPCOMING EVENTS AT MONTALVO

Anoushka Shankar Project
Apr 29, 7:30 pm $40/35; Members $36/31
Sitar Master Ravi Shankar's daughter is a leading figure in Indian classical music today. On her latest record she teamed up with sister Norah Jones! *The Chicago Tribune* raved about Anoushka's stellar talent "...sounding every bit the equal of her illustrious father."

Richie Havens
May 13, 7:30 pm $35/30; Members $31/27
Gifted with one of the most recognizable voices in popular music, "This acoustic soul giant truly seems to be getting more inspiring and graceful with age." *Billboard Magazine*

Brooke White and Michael Johns
May 14, 8 pm $35/30; Members $31/27
American Idol Season 7 finalists Brooke White and Michael Johns are on tour together in support of their individual album releases. Brooke's 2009 album *High Hopes & Heartbreak* was #7 on Billboard's Independent Albums Chart. Michael's 2009 album *Hold Back My Heart* received great acclaim and he enjoyed a successful run on last year's "David Foster and Friends Tour."

All events at the Carriage House Theatre
Tickets: Montalvo Box Office
408.961.5858 M-F, 10am-4pm or
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